WASHINGTON STAR

Happy Talk About A Happy Island

By Sheilah Kast
Star-News Staff Writer

With a conspiratorial grin, the speaker of the house of the oldest continuing legislature in the world acknowledged that his government on the Isle of Man is going through something of a constitutional crisis.

His serene Manx features showed not a trace of concern. His ruddy Manx complexion turned not one whit ruddier in shame.

It seems that the last remaining deemster, or high court judge, is being removed from the legislature.

Scandal? Bribes? Echoes of Watergate?

"Not a-tall," answered Charles Kerruish, speaker of the House of Keys, which claims 900 years of history on the tiny island halfway between England and Ireland.

"It's purely a democratic sort of thing. When you get a judiciary and a legislature combining to produce the laws, it's inadvisable to have the judiciary applying the laws they helped pass," Kerruish said.

So, in the continuing evolution of a 900-year-old unwritten constitution, he said, "the time has come to separate the two. It's one of those things: everything must appear to be above suspicion."

Things on the Isle of Man generally are above suspicion anyway, Kerruish acknowledged.

"People know each other very, very intimately. Because of this you don't get the sort of scandalous development you'd get elsewhere, in the sense that everybody knows everything everywhere anyway."

Kerruish was in Arlington last week for the biennial convention of the North American Manx Association — " 'Tis said that in Cleveland alone, there are more of Manx descent than in the whole island," — and was more than happy to talk about his happy island and its 50,000 inhabitants.

AN HOUR'S conversation with Kerruish paints Man as a magical place:

- Where crime is almost unheard of;
- Where the nearest pollution problem comes from Liverpool, 90 miles to the east;
- Where Manxwomen got the vote 80 years ago and have functioned with great equality ever since;
- And where islanders pay 21 percent of their income to taxes (compared to Britain's 33 percent), but still end up with a surplus in the island's tiny budget.

It's the personal touch that makes crime such a rarity among the Manx, according to Alf Devereux, also a member of the House of Keys.

"My son would be deadly ashamed if he brought disgrace on the family, by being caught with drugs or something like that," Devereux said, his gaelic Manx accent bristling with intensity.

That might explain the law-abiding inclinations of the native Manx, but what about the half-million tourists who flood the isle each summer?

"Birching," comes the one-word answer from Kerruish. "We retain corporal punishment . . . in the courts."

INSTEAD OF a fine or a few days in the pokey, he expalined, a mugger or burglar can expect to be taken to a small room, examined by a doctor and then soundly thrashed with a series of birch twigs tied to a handle.

"It's the indignity of it," Devereux said, by way of explaining the deterrent value of such a spanking.

"Thus birched, Kerruish said, the leader of a street gang "has lost his leadership. His ego is punctured."

Edward F. Sayle, the Arlingtonian who arranged the Manx association convention, told of an English railroad engineer who returns to the island every holiday since he was birched for his part in a barroom brawl.

The engineer couldn't sit down for three days, Sayle said, and now knows he's safe from making a fool of himself in the barrooms of Man.

WASHED BY the Irish Sea to the west and the Gulf Stream to the east, Man long has been the holiday retreat of many Britons. They sprawl in the sun on the beaches of Douglas, lined with mid-Victorian rowhouses, and then take in the history of ancient castles and abbeys.

Man was the capital of the Viking world — as Kerruish noted, "a handy spot to rest before going on to marraud further down the coast" — and it was traded as a pawn by Scottish and English kings during their 16th and 17th century wars.

When the fishing failed in the early 1800s, and the mines became unprofitable 30 years later, waves of emigrants left for America and other continents. Careful analysis of telephone books indicates there are close to half-a-million Manx descendents in North America, according to Sayle.

Miles Standish is probably the best know American Manxman, although President John Tyler's wife Laetitia and Patrick Henry's right-hand man, Col. William Fletcher, also claimed the line.

The Manx, who intend to issue a postage stamp of Fletcher in 1976, got medals from the Bicentennial Commission for their thoughtfulness. "The links are very strong" between the British island dependency and the U.S., Kerruish said.

The island pays five percent of its revenue to Great Britain (to take care of the tiresome external matters such as defense and diplomacy) and concentrates on its tourists, its mills, its farms and its history.

And the legislature still holds its open-air sessions each Midsummer's Day on ancient Tynwald Hill, where the citizens hear the newly-passed laws and get a chance to gripe about them, or anything else on their minds.

It's the kind of peaceful serenity that allows Kerruish to say of his Belfast brethren, 70 miles east; "We feel terribly sorry for the people of Northern Ireland, but there's very little we can do except sympathize."

He offered his regrets about Watergate, that America, "which we regard as the protective shield for the whole western world, should have to cope with such a thing . . ."

But the scandals don't touch home. With stately grace, the legislature will remove the deemster from its midst, and no one will contest it.

"The chap who's being removed from office hasn't been appointed yet," Kerruish explained with a twinkle.